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American Poet Emily Dickinson
Set to Music by 20th Century Composers

Written reflection within degree project
The sounding part consists of the following recording:
Aaron Copland Song Cycle Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson
Abstract

When singers perform art songs, how many of them, especially students, learn about the poem and poet behind the lyrics? It might be that a number of singers focus on composers, however not poets. Even in concert programs, it is common to only write the composer's name. I am one of the singers that has learned lyrics in the last minute before a concert or an examination. I will experiment with changing my learning process and see if that makes any difference when performing the art song.

The purpose of this study is also to focus on the poet Emily Dickinson. Furthermore, to find out about the music of composers from the 20th century onwards using Dickinson’s poems. I choose Aaron Copland’s song cycle “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson”. Finally, I will perform the work and demonstrate if there is a difference in the singing interpretation by studying not only the music but also the poems behind the lyrics.

“Who is Emily Dickinson?” The study explores this question first. After researching 100 songs using her poems, I chose three composers, Aaron Copland, Libby Larsen and Niccolò Castiglioni. Thereafter, “Bind me - I can still sing” of Larsen and “Dickinson-Lieder” of Castiglioni is mentioned. Furthermore, the song cycle “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson” by Copland is analyzed deeply to find out more about the piece and why the composer was inspired by Dickinson. It was discovered that one is able to understand the piece deeply, knowing not only about the life of the composer, but also the poet leads to a better understanding of the work. From the singer’s point of view, the level of
expression and singing performance has improved after researching the poet Emily Dickinson.

The study concludes knowing deeply about the poet that there is no doubt how important the poem is when understanding and interpreting art song.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

I have been interested in composers from the 20th century for a long time. I was inspired by my singing teachers and learned about works from modern contemporary music. I studied mainly Italian composers, from early 20th century to works of living composers. The works ranged from songs with clear melody to songs with no distinct melody that instead created an atmosphere with sound. I had never heard that kind of music before and listened intently. Since then, I have been absorbed in the world of modern contemporary music.

A few years ago, I wanted to compete in one of the famous modern contemporary singing competitions and I was watching the list of choices of repertoire for the competition. In the beginning, I was excited to choose the pieces because it was the area that I was most interested in. Later on, I was overwhelmed by so much work to do. The list was huge, with composers from well-known to unknown. It was also not easy to find the score or recordings of the pieces. I was thinking about combinations of songs from other eras, searching for music and how to combine them to create my own program. Many times, I saw works with titles from Emily Dickinson’s poems. Many composers used her poems for their works. However, I had never heard her name before and I just wondered, “Who is Emily Dickinson?” As I read the poems and listened to composer’s works of Dickinson, my interest in her increased.

I often listen to the music first, then I start to think about and study the lyrics, what is written or what is the theme. However this time I was more interested in the poetry than the music. When I saw the contents of a song cycle
by Aaron Copland titled “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson” it caught my eye. That was “I felt a funeral in my brain.” It was a title with a strong impact to me and I was curious to listen to the music. Then I turned the page and started to read the score. The music was a very interesting combination of Copland’s music and Dickinson’s poem. However, this piece has a very low range for my voice. Nevertheless, I wanted to study and sing it. This was an unusual thing for me. I often do not sing low range music because it is hard to express the music with my soprano voice. However, this time I want to challenge myself with a new type of music. At the same time, I also would like to search deeply about poet Emily Dickinson. I want to know more about the poetry of Dickinson and composers using her poems. I would like to sing songs which different composers have composed using the same poem of Dickinson which were in my voice range, soprano. Furthermore, I wish to add Dickinson’s poetry to my repertoire and express how different composers use and relate to Dickinson’s poetry. Finally, I would like to perform my interpretation of their works on stage, in front of an audience and see if there is any difference compared to studying the lyrics last, as I normally do.
Chapter 2 Emily Dickinson

Who Is Emily Dickinson?

Emily Dickinson was an American poet. She is one of the most important poets of the 20th century. However, she was not well known during her lifetime.

Emily Elisabeth Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in New England, on the 10th of December 1830. She came from a prominent family that was involved in the political and educational community. Her father Edward Dickinson (1803-1874) was a lawyer and a powerful figure in politics in the town of Amherst. Her mother Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804-1882) was a quiet person of poor health, however, managed all housework and childcare, as was typical of a woman of the era. Emily had one brother, William Austin Dickinson (1829-1895) and one sister three years younger, Lavina Norcross Dickinson (1833-1899). She was especially close to Emily and was said to have understood her well (Onishi 2017, 22).

The family was very wealthy. They could order a portrait of the Dickinson siblings in childhood from a painter. Emily also got a piano to acquire culture. It was unusual at that time. But the father Edward wanted the family to have simple and strict lifestyle. Amherst was a town with strong religious belief of Puritanism. Edward also a strong believer and embodied a Puritan character (Onishi 2017, 16-17).

Emily studied at Amherst until 16 years old. She went to Amherst Academy which had a novel educational system for the time and acquired a wide
cultural literacy. She even had piano and singing lessons. After she left the town she entered at the Mount Holyoke in Female Seminary in South Hadley in the fall of 1847 (Onishi 2017, 42). It was the first boarding school for girls in the United States. Mount Holyoke had not only home economics education but also higher science education system and music education. They had choir lessons twice a week and the principal believed that singing hymns would deepen the religious minds of the students. However, it was too strict education policy and teachers had completely different ideas than Emily. She thought that it was threatening her mental freedom. In particular, the hardest part for Emily was a class of the Confession of her Christian beliefs at the school assemble. She was prompted to confess every time but she never did. For Emily, this was not something that she took lightly, although others students saw their confession just as a formality. Emily grew up in Amherst which was a Christian religious town and she did not deny God’s existence. However, she dropped out the Mount Holyoke in one year and went back to Amherst.

Her personality was quiet and calm. She was not very sociable, but she communicated through correspondence with people throughout her life. She commonly attended Sunday services and Bible assemblies. However, she gradually kept more to herself from around the age of 30 and eventually stopped seeing people (Onishi 2017, 4).

Emily was single all her life and spent most of her time in the home where she was born in Amherst. In 1885, she became ill and got Bright’s disease that was an incurable disease in those days. It is called kidney disease nowadays. In the beginning of May 1886, she sent a short note to her close cousins Louise and
Fanny Norcross, which said only “Little Cousins, Called Back, Emily” (Dickinson and Ward 1986, 906). Later that day she fell into a coma. On the 15th of May 1886, Emily died. She became 55 years old.

**How Did Dickinson Become a Known Poet?**

Emily Dickinson wrote nearly 1800 poems during her lifetime. However, only one letter and ten poems were published in local newspapers in Boston before she died. How come Emily Dickinson, relatively unknown during her lifetime, became a poet who now represents the 20th century?

It began when her younger sister Lavina sorted through the belongings Emily had left behind. She discovered her cache of poems as she was sorting out the remains of Emily's room. In her lifetime, Emily was passionate about writing poetry and letters to people close to her. As mentioned above, she almost never went out of her house and met less and less people when she was in her thirties. That time was the prime of her life as a poet. “By the time Dickinson turned 35, she had composed more than 1100 concise, powerful lyrics that astutely examine pain, grief, joy, love, nature, and art” (The Emily Dickinson Museum 2020). It is said that Emily created most of her work from midnight to dawn. She got the consent from her father Edward and that was the most exceptional time to write the poetry for her. It could be inspiring with the mysterious passage of time and midnight calm of tranquility for her.

It was known to her family that she was writing poems from midnight to morning. Maybe they thought she was sending letters with her poems or gave out
flower bouquets with poems to friends. However, it was beyond imagination to even her close sister Lavina that Emily had written almost 1800 poems and organized them neatly. This was the start of Emily becoming one of the most famous poets of the 20th century.

Lavina started to proceed with publishing Emily’s collection of poems. She first talked to Susan Gilbert, who was a wife of Emily’s brother Austin and lived next door. Especially, she was one of the best friends of Emily and understood her well. Susan had received a lot of letters and poems from Emily, and they had also been discussing opinions about Emily’s poetry. Therefore, Lavina thought that Susan was the best person to help with editing the poems. However, time passed without much progress (Onishi 2017, 89-90).

At that time, Lavina instead consulted Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas W. Higginson. Mabel was a friend of Emily’s brother Austin. Mabel and Austin had also had an affair together. She had a husband who worked at Amherst University as a professor of astronomy. Mabel also worked as an author and social activist for developing women’s rights. She traveled together with her husband around the world to Japan, South Africa and Hawaii which was unusual at that time. She had a completely different character than Emily. Thomas was an important person of the famous literary community in Massachusetts. He was one of the persons that Emily trusted the most and he had also advised her about her poetry.

Four years after Emily died, in 1890, her first collection of poetry was published. It was titled simply “Poems by Emily Dickinson.” It was published in
Boston, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas W. Higginson and became an immediate sensation. It was reprinted eleven times in just in two years.

Until now, “The Poems of Emily Dickinson” have been published three times by different editors. The first edition was in 1890 by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas W. Higginson, the second edition was by Thomas Johnson in 1955, and the third edition was by Ralph W. Franklin in 1999. However, some of the poems are numbered differently, because new ones were discovered and added to the different editions.

Unfortunately, the first edition deliberately lacked some of her poems which did not appear for personal reason of Mabel and also some of the poems were not true to Emily’s original (Onishi 2017, 14-15). Even in 2016, yet another collection was published by Cristanne Miller, titled “Emily Dickinson’s Poems, As She Preserved Them.”

The hidden and mysterious life of Dickinson still attracts the attention of many researchers and scholars more than 130 years after her death. Not only authors but also composers, artists and many other people are inspired and keep discovering Dickinson’s world.

**Poetry of Dickinson**

Dickinson mostly used a poetic metre of common metre and ballad metre. Basically, common metre is composed of a short syllable followed by a long syllable, consisting of four lines that alternate between iambic four metrical feet
per line and iambic three metrical feet per line. Ballad metre is a variation of common metre.

An iamb is a foot or beat used in various types of poetry. It means short syllable followed by long syllable. It has been applied in English poetry to describe poetry in terms of syllable strength, that is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Style of common metre is ABAB, consisting of four lines, where the two A lines rhyme and the two B lines rhyme. It is commonly used in church hymns.

For example, a Christian hymn “Amazing Grace” (1772) by John Newton:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, – (A)
That saved a wretch like me! – (B)
I once was lost, but now am found, – (A)
Was blind, but now I see. – (B)

Style of ballad metre is XAXA, consisting of four lines, where the two A lines rhyme but the X lines do not.

For example, a poem of Emily Dickinson:

Because I could not stop for Death – (X)
He kindly stopped for me – (A)
The Carriage held but just Ourselves – (X)
And Immortality. (A)
Common and Ballad metre are usually a simple and conservative style, however, Dickinson used a lot of capital letters, punctuation and dashes, going against the tradition of English poetry.

Furthermore, Dickinson took light of traditional English poetry and prosody. She sometimes intentionally broke the rhythm to emphasize the characteristic words. She also broke grammatical rules, for example inverting sentences and used verbs as nouns. Dickinson even made her own words and her own adverb.

The themes of Dickinson’s poetry was often about nature, seasons, death, spiritual, love, journey, life and eternity. It was often a mix of more than one theme. She also used a combination of humor or satire, puns and irony.

Dickinson did not put titles on her poems. Afterwards, the first line of the poem has been used as a title. Work numbers have also been added to help identify the poems. However, sometimes there are different numbers used for the same poem. As mentioned earlier, Dickinson’s collection of poems have been published in three famous editions by different editors. New poems were discovered and the existing ones were rearranged in the order they are believed to have been written. Therefore, some of the poems have different work numbers in the different editions. For example, the poem “Because I could not stop for Death - ” has work number 712 in the edition by Thomas Johnson, published in 1955 and number 479 in the edition by Ralph W. Franklin, published in 1999. Usually, the editors’ initials are used and it is written J712 or F479.
Chapter 3 What Made Her Poetry So Appealing to Composers?

Composers from 20th Century Onwards with Dickinson’s Poetry

At first, I went to the National Swedish library for music, theatre and dance which is one of the largest libraries of its kind in Europe. I searched for song cycles and vocal works that included Dickinson's poetry. Among them, I picked up and studied works that are good for my range, and that I think will fit my repertoire.

These are the vocal works I found:

Martin Butler (1960-) American

Niccolò Castiglioni (1932-1996) Italian

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) American

Arthur Farwell (1872-1952) American

Gordon Getty (1933-) American

Presse, sole representative
Sylvia Glickman (1932-2006) American

Lori Laitman (1955-) American

Jules Langert (1932-) American

Libby Larsen (1950-) American
Larsen, Libby. 1997. “Chanting to paradise, four songs for high voice and piano on the poetry of Emily Dickinson”, Minnesota: Libby Larsen Publishing

David Leisner (1953-) American
Leisner, David. 1984. “Simple songs, for medium voice and guitar”. New York. AMP

Ib Norholm (1931-) Danish

Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987) American

André Previn (1929-2019) German-American

Davis Sharon (1937-) American
Composers Aaron Copland, Libby Larsen and Nicolò Castiglioni

I have found more than 100 songs made from Dickinson’s poems. Naturally, many American composers write works using her poems.

American composer Aaron Copland, who is regarded as a pioneering figure in American music, (Boosey & Hawkes 2020) said that he was touched by Dickinson’s vulnerability and loneliness in her poems. Copland did not plan to write a song cycle at first. However, he came across a poem “The Chariot” which inspired him to compose 12 songs based on different poems by Dickinson (Starr 2002, 3-4).

Libby Larsen, who is certainly a major American art song composer, wrote a song “Bind me - Still I can sing” which is part of four songs for high voice, “Chanting to Paradise.” She wrote down a program note of the score that: . . . the use of the vowel i in this poem simply astounds me in its elegant metaphoric journey. If one follows it, the journey of i, one follows the journey of the soul of the first person voice of the poem (Larsen 1997, Program note, para. 3). The tempo is specified as “spaciously.” The piano part follows the vocal part like a wind. Although, it is not a refreshing wind and the flow of the music is unstable just as the poem. Moreover, the vocal part expresses the mystery of the poem with a long note “i” vowel.

Especially interesting to me was the piece by Italian composer Niccolò Castiglioni. It is easy to imagine how many American composers use poetry of Dickinson. Nevertheless, I was curious how Castiglioni found Dickinson’s poem and published “Dickinson- Lieder” in 1977.
Castiglioni was born in Milan in 1932. He studied piano and composition at the Milan Conservatory. After graduation, he studied deeper about twelve-tone composition at the Mozarteum of Salzburg and also attended the Ferienkurse für neue Musik of Darmstadt (Federazione CEMAT 2004). It is said that “Castiglioni is quite untypical, not only within the framework of Italian culture, but also in international terms, and he has been so ever since the 1950s” (Federazione CEMAT 2004). He worked as a pianist for a short period in the 1950s. However, after that he became passionate about composition and teaching. Between 1966 to 1970 he lived in the United States, where Castiglioni taught composition at the universities of Michigan, Washington and California (Federazione CEMAT 2004).

He most likely got to know Dickinson’s work at this time. Castiglioni said that “the American universe deeply fascinated him. He also said that from then on he always felt a sincere sympathy for the Americans” (Edizioni Suvini Zerboni 2019).

“Dickinson-Lieder” has a lot of high pitch sounds, often uses big intervals and long note or staccato to illuminate the words of Dickinson’s poetry. I think that this is a fresh way to express and portray the world of Dickinson. Castiglioni chose six poems and put them together as one work.

I had planned to search for the same poem by Dickinson used in different works of composers that were in my voice range, compare them, analyze the songs and sing them. I thought it would be easy to find same poem used in several works. For example, in the romantic era, composers like F. Schubert, R. Schumann, and H. Wolf commonly picked up novels of J. W von Goethe, for
instance “Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship.” Composers were inspired by
famous novels. Dickinson is also impressive and has a number of particularly
famous poems, however I looked into more than 100 songs, however, as far as I
looked, I could not find different composers using the same common poem that
my range, soprano, could sing. I spent a lot of time and wanted to find works.
However it was difficult to find songs based on the same poem of Dickinson,
even though she left behind about 1800 works.

That is why I changed my plan. I now focus on one song cycle, using
Dickinson’s poetry and analyze it deeply. I choose “Twelve Poems of Emily
Dickinson” of Aaron Copland. There are three reasons why I chose the song
cycle. The first is that while researching the music of Dickinson’s lyrics, I felt that
many pieces of the Copland’s song cycle appealed to me compared to other
works. The second reason is that I am curious how I would perform and interpret
a 30 minutes long song cycle to an audience, after analyzing the work. The last
reason is the amount of work. Analyzing and performing works by both Copland,
Larsen and Castiglioni would not be possible, so I focused on the most interesting
song cycle to me, the one by Copland.
Chapter 4 Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson  
by Aaron Copland

Biography of Aaron Copland

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) was an American composer. It is said that he is one of the most important American composers of the 20th century. “Copland conducted, organized concerts, wrote books on music, and served as an American cultural ambassador to the world” (Boosey & Hawkes 2020).

Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn, New York on 14th November 1900. In the beginning of the 20th century in Brooklyn was filled with immigrants of many nationalities. His father Harris Morris Copland and mother Sarah Mittenthal Copland were both Jewish immigrants from Russian-Lithuanian background. Aaron grow up with two brothers and two sisters. He was the youngest of five children. The father opened his own business H. M. Copland’s department store at Washington Avenue in Brooklyn. Everybody in the family worked at the store. Aaron helped out at the store since childhood (Pollack 1999, 15-16). His mother Sarah was interested in music and their children took music lessons. Aaron began learning piano from his big sister Laurie. When he was 14 years old, he started to take lessons from a piano teacher and by the age of 16, composition lesson from Rubin Goldmark (Song of America 2020).

The turning point came at the age of 20, Copland got the first fellowship at the Conservatoire American at the Palace of Fontainebleau in France for a year. In June of 1921, he went to France and met a young great teacher at the summer
course in harmony. Her name was Nadia Boulanger. Copland was impressed by Boulanger’s class, studying from Bach to Stravinsky and dissonance harmony. After the course at the Conservatoire, Copland moved to Paris to continue studying with her. When he met Boulanger for the first time, he was worried to learn from a female teacher. However, he learned under Boulanger until 1924. She had the most important influence on Copland’s career as a composer. Boulanger is notable that she had produced many leading composers and musicians of the 20th century. In total, Copland stayed in Paris for three years, studying with Boulanger. He also studied the French language, history classes at the Sorbonne University, attended plays, and absorbed lots of information.

During the study abroad, “Copland began to think about finding a distinctively American sound. ‘There is a French-sounding music, a German sound, why not American? We had done it in ragtime and jazz, but not in the kind of concert music I was interested in’” (Aaron Copland 2020). Copland would become a leader in the generation that changed the American style of concert music.

In 1924, Copland went back to America. His first major performances of an orchestral work “Symphony for Organ and Orchestra” was premiered in New York, 1925. The dissonant, amazing combination of organ and orchestra created a sensation. The work was also performed in Boston, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. Copland met him in Paris in 1924 and Koussevitzky is said to have had a strong influence on Copland. Koussevitzky was the music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 to 1949 and he was willing to present works of Copland to the world. Aaron Copland was very talented but he was also
having extraordinary good fortune, meeting the right person in the right time and place. 1925 was also the premiere of “Music for the Theater.” This piece was determined to find an American sound in concert music.

“Copland's primary goal was to compose the best music he could. A quality of excellence is evident in all his work, from a wide range of abstract concert music to collaborative works for radio, film, ballet, and opera. He had a secondary goal: to promote the cause of American music and to increase performance opportunities for composers” (Aaron Copland 2020).

In 1928, Copland initiated with composer Roger Sessions “The Copland-Sessions Concerts” in New York, an important series of concerts devoted exclusively to contemporary music, especially for young American composers. The success of this series has introduced many works of European avant-garde to the American audiences. During this period, Copland began teaching at the New School of Social Research with his association and also writing for The New York Times, The Musical Quarterly and a number of other journals.

The decade of the 1930’s and the Great Depression, “Copland sought to produce works that appealed to mass audiences, works that spoke to a wide variety of individuals during difficult economic times” (Song of America 2020). The focus on labor issues in this era also influenced the music business. Copland has also been active in many institutions designed to promote the professional life of musicians. During the period, he traveled in Europe, Africa and Mexico. When he stayed for his first visit in Mexico, Copland was inspired by Mexican folk music that he heard at a dance hall. In 1936, Copland composed “El Salón México” which became the first of his signature works. Making use of elements
of Mexican folk music in the composition, Copland succeeded to communicate with a large audience. This piece would adapted the work for the musical film “Fiesta” in 1947.

The 1940s were arguably the most productive years for Copland. He composed the ballet “Rodeo” in 1942 and “Appalachian Spring” in 1944. Both were huge successes. Copland often used elements of folk music in his works. During this time, he also generated music synonymous with American patriotism “Lincoln Portrait” and “Fanfare for the Common Man” in 1942. Both of which were intended to boost American morale. Furthermore, “Copland broadened his audience by composing for theatre, radio and films” (Listen Music & Culture 2020).

In 1949, Copland went back to Europe for the first time in 12 years. He looked for a new generation of composers and found French composer Pierre Boulez. Copland noticed that Boulez dominated the group of post-war avant-garde composers, incorporating serial techniques. Copland also met composers using the twelve-note music of Arnold Schönberg. In Florence, Italy he met Luigi Dallapiccola. The composers Copland met in Europe inspired him to broaden his style and techniques, especially serial music.

Around 1950s, Copland focused on writing vocal music. He produced most of the vocal works during these 10 years. “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson” in 1950, “Old American Songs” in 1950 and 1952, and opera “The Tender Land” in 1954. This opera is not famous repertoire of opera stage. However the most memorable aria “Laurie’s Song” is often performed for soprano and piano.
In 1962, Copland composed orchestral work “Connotations”, commissioned for Lincoln Center Inaugural Concert. This work was twelve-tone and forms of musical serialism. In the 1960s, Copland had turned from composer to conductor. “In his later years he had great difficulty capturing his inspiration through composing; in his own words, ‘It was exactly as if someone had simply turned off a faucet’” (Song of America 2020). After 1970, Copland stopped composing but continued to do lectures and conducting concerts, radio and television until he was 83. In his late years, he was frustrated by his inability to harness his memory and his condition became much worse. In New York, on 2nd December 1990 Copland passed away of Alzheimer’s disease and respiratory failure, some weeks after his 90th birthday.

Copland and “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson”

In 1949 when Copland was 49 years old, he started to write “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson” and finished the work in 1950. The premiere was on 18th May in 1950, Copland participated as pianist with soprano Alice Howland performing the song cycle at Columbia University in New York City, as part of the Sixth Annual Festival of Contemporary American Music. The song cycle was published by Boosey & Hawkes in 1951. Today, it is said that “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson” is one of the most famous song cycles of the 20th century (Starr 2002, 1).

Copland was a successful American composer who was already well established in the 1940s. At that time, he was writing works by orders and having
commissions as his stance. “The Dickinson cycle, however, was not a commissioned work. Copland did not even have a cycle in mind when he began to set Emily Dickinson’s poetry in 1949” (Starr 2002, 3). Nevertheless, it will be the first large-scale vocal work in his career in 20 years. The work proved inspirational and Copland found new interest in the solo voice. He published two sets of songs, “Old American Songs”, in 1950 and 1952. It became his masterpiece of vocal work. In the words of Copland:

…Originally, I had no intention of composing a song cycle using Emily Dickinson’s poems. I fell in love with one poem, “The Chariot.” Its first lines absolutely threw me…After I set the poem, I continued reading Emily Dickinson. The more I read, the more her vulnerability and loneliness touched me. The poems seemed the work of a sensitive yet independent soul. I found another poem to set, then one more, and yet another (Song of America 2020).

It is written on the first page of the score that:

…the poems center about no single theme, but they treat of subject matter particularly close to Miss Dickinson: nature, death, life, eternity. Only two of the songs are related thematically, the 7th and the 12th. Nevertheless, the composer hopes that, in seeking a musical counterpart for the unique personality of the poet, he has given the songs, taken together, the aspect of a song cycle (Copland 1951, 2).
Analysis of the Song Cycle

The song cycle is divided into two parts. One is from no.1 to no.6. The other is from no.7 to no.12. At first, the subject is nature, as in no.1 “Nature, the gentlest mother” and no.2 “There came a wind like a bugle.” Secondly, the subject of death appears in no.3 “Why do they shut me out of Heaven?” and no.4 “The world feels dusty.” From no.5 “Heart, we will forget him”, there is returning to life again. Also in no.6 “Dear March, come in!” Finally, the theme of eternity is introduced with the no.7 “Sleep is supposed to be.” From no.8, it runs through the cycle of the subjects a second time, in the same order. No.8 “When they come back”, nature. No.9 “I felt a funeral in my brain”, death. No.10 “I’ve heard an organ talk sometimes” and no.11 “Going to Heaven!” No.11 is the final departure from life to eternity and no.12 “The Chariot” concludes with eternity.

No.1 “Nature, the gentlest mother” begins with a spacious piano solo of nine bars. The music expresses the subject of nature. This piano part expresses the morning and birds singing and describes the character of the song. The piano part leads the whole song with the musical language of the bird character and the vocal part follow it. This song feels like a gentle flow of the pastoral nature.

No.2 “There came a wind like a bugle” is on the same subject of nature as no.1. However, it has a contrasting aspect of nature. The first bar of the piano part describes an aggressive dissonance of chromaticism and is almost like a storm. The song is rushing, has an unstable tempo and dynamic. The vocal part is led throughout by the piano part, like it follows the storm.

When dealing with the second subject of death, no.3 “Why do they shut me out of Heaven?” the tone changes and creates a strong break in the music. The
vocal part leads the music with a recitative style and the piano part is devoted to
accompaniment.

Nevertheless, here between the second and the third song there is a
connection created by exciting musical and poetical factors. The last part of no.2
finishes in fortissimo dynamic. Soon after, in the beginning of the third poem it
answers the last part of no.2. “Why do they shut me out of Heaven?/ Did I sing
too loud?” It is a clever work of Copland.

Next, the fourth song “The world feels dusty” continues on the same
subject of death. The music tempo is very slow, the time signature is three-four
and repeatedly plays a quarter note followed by a half note in almost every bar of
the piano part. It is like describing a lullaby. The music expresses a cradle,
leading the piano part. This is an perfect fit with the poem describing sleep like
death. Finally, the last bar finishes G5 to A5 with piano part of the right hand. It
seems like it is expressing the departure of souls. Additionally, Starr says:

. . . Dickinson’s final stanza suggests the image of the poet/singer at the side of a
dying friend: “Mine be the ministry/When thy thirst comes.” This creates a very
particular context in which to hear the song that immediately follows, “Heart, we
will forget him” (Starr 2002, 46).

No.5 “Heart, we will forget him” turns to the subject of life. This is one of
Dickinson’s earlier poems. It seems to be written about a personal experience of
love. In this poem, death is a metaphor of a past lover. The experience is
unforgettable pain. However, it is saying that life needs to have emotional
balance. The music is a sentimental ballad and the closing of the poem “I may
remember him” says that it might not be so easy to forget him after all. This
whole piece has a very slow tempo. The framework of the piano and vocal parts describe a counterpoint. According to Starr:

. . . Certainly Copland assumed a major risk here by setting one of Dickinson’s most apparently conventional poems in a relatively conventional style and by placing it directly after a song “The world feels dusty,” in which the poem and the music both are so original brilliant as to be breathtaking” (Starr 2002, 68).

No.6 “Dear March, come in!” has the impression of returning to life from death. Returning to life is described as the actual season of rebirth, spring. The music tempo is written as “with exuberance.” No.6 is the work that it is able to show both Dickinson and Copland being pure and playful. The vocal part is clear to sing with the notes matching the flow of the poem, even in a fast “scherzo” tempo. Furthermore, this tension describes the halfway point of the cycle.

The last subject, eternity, is dealt with in no.7 “Sleep is supposed to be” which presents a change of direction of the cycle to the last song. Eternity is a symbol that leads to death. The singer makes the final journey from death to eternity. The music gives us clearly different surroundings from no.6 to no.7. Moreover, the first two bars of the piano solo part are the same as last song “The Chariot.” These are only related thematically of eternity by Copland.

No. 7 is contrast between sleep and morning. To express this, the interval of sound is wide between sleep and morning. There are three forte symbols written on the vocal highest pitch which expresses the breadth. It is also the highest pitch B5-flat which appears in the song cycle. Even the width of the sound expresses the contrast of the poem properly.
From no. 7 to no. 8, it is interesting to note that the last page of the score of no. 7 is written “long pause before starting no. 8.” Moreover, the last line of the poem is written “That is the break of day” and vocal part of the last three notes are C4# (break) - E4 (of) - E (day). There is also a large musical interval between C4# to E5, minor 10th.

In no. 8 “When they come back” nature is the subject, although it is with a different poetic focus compared to nature of song no. 1. The vision of nature is rebirth in the springtime. This is the second time that rebirth in the springtime appears. Before in no. 6. “Dear March come in!” is written with exuberance and brightly music of spring. However, no. 8 is not the same type of spring as before. The music expresses happiness that the spring has come back. However, the poem says that it is the last spring and it will never come back again. The music also expresses this cloudy spring using the tempo, which is not stable and remains uncertain at the end.

No. 9 “I felt a funeral in my brain” is surely metaphorically dealing with subject of death. The music is a funeral march and heavy, however, with a rather fast tempo. This piece is the darkest of the poems and this is also reflected in the music. No. 9 leaves a very strong impression. Even the piano part is used like a percussion instrument with powerful tones almost like a drum.

No. 9 and no. 10 “I’ve heard an organ talk sometimes” are opposites. In no. 10 the music is very simple and has sound of sonority. The poem also uses common meter often used in hymns. The piano part seems like playing an organ in a church. Last five bars feel like “powerful ‘amen’ cadences” (Starr 2002, 88) and triumphant leading to no. 11 “Going to Heaven!” It is very interesting that
only this piece connects to the next song using the same key of B-flat major, it is like a road to heaven.

Copland avoids harmonic connections between one song and the next. Every piece has a fresh start. However, between no.10 and no.11 there is an exception. No.11 is full of harmonic concepts. Starr says that “given its position in the cycle, ‘Going to Heaven!’ must convey an intense treatment of the concepts of death, life and eternity in order to prepare adequately the ultimate resolution represented in the final song, ‘The Chariot’” (Starr 2002, 91). The piano part of no.11 starts with a parallel opening, similar to no.3 “Why do they shut me out of Heaven?” These two pieces appear using recitative style. The music expresses a fast tempo and scherzo. It also shares the same subject of life with no.6 “Dear March, come!” The vocal line starts diatonic-scale style, like ascending to heaven.

The last song no.12 “The Chariot” combine all four subjects intricately with Copland’s natural flow composition. Copland gathers the cycle like a steady journey towards eternity. No.12 has dotted-rhythm motive. The words have many religious meanings. The music has repetition, same rhythm style and leap consistency. It appears to reinforce the theme of reincarnation. It is really well connected and a perfect fit with the poem. At last the song finishes in the key of B major with a lightness and freshness.
Poetic Accuracy of Copland

When I started looking into the song cycle, I had two questions about Dickinson’s poetry in the work of Copland. One is no.9 “I felt a funeral in my brain” and no.12 “The Chariot” were missing some stanza. The other question I had is why only no.12 has a title.

In the beginning, I wondered if Copland had intentionally cut some stanzas to fit his works. However, I noticed that it was a strange place of the stanza to cut compared with Dickinson’s original poem. For example, in “I felt a funeral in my brain” the last of the five stanzas was cut. In “The Chariot” the third of the six stanzas was cut. Especially, it seems strange to cut the conclusion of the poem in the “I felt a funeral in my brain”.

Starr indicates that:

. . . It is a traditional aspect of the creation of art songs that composers changes may involve repetition or deletion of words, phrases, or entire stanzas to achieve local expressive effects or large-scale formal shaping of the music and may involve changes in words or word order in the interest of making particular phrases “sing” more naturally from the vocalist’s point of view (Starr 2002, 22).

However, the real reason has to do with the publishing history of Emily Dickinson’s poems. Copland worked to compose “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson” from 1949 to 1950. “It is from such ‘flawed’ edition that Copland took the texts for his Dickinson song cycle, simply because in 1949 they were the only editions readily available to him” (Starr 2002, 22). Now we usually take the editions by Thomas Johanson in 1955 or by Ralph Franklin in 1990 to be the most
authentic to Dickinson’s poems (See chapter 2). Unfortunately, when Copland composed the song cycle, these editions were not available. That is why the stanzas are missing.

Naturally, this is the same reason behind the second question of mine, why no.12 is titled “The Chariot.” It is a feature of editions of Dickinson that when the poem is not titled, the first line is usually used as the title. Nevertheless, when Copland took the poem, it was titled “The Chariot.” Today it is called “Because I could not stop for Death.”

When researching about no.12 “The Chariot”, I noticed that Copland changed one word. Originally Dickinson’s poem reads “Because I could not stop for Death” in the first line. Copland used “Because I would not stop for Death” in the first line. According to Starr:

. . . “Because I would not stop for Death” is not much easier to sing than Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death.” Furthermore, Copland’s change eliminates an effective alliteration in the poet’s line, one that carries through to the next line as well: “Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me.” And the change from “could” to “would” also alters the implications of this line, perhaps significantly. . . The only answer that seems at all convincing has to do with overall context. The song that immediately precedes “The Chariot” in the cycle is “Going to Heaven!” We have observed that “Going to Heaven!” concludes with a striking change in its poetic and musical direction. . . (Starr 2002, 24)

This is an interesting observation. One can understand that Copland wanted to express a great deal when gathering the song cycle in one work.
Nevertheless, the composer is not truly “accurate” to the poem. It might be impossible to compose art songs faithfully to the poems.

Other changing words of the song cycle are for example, present tense to past tense, singular form to plural form, adverb to conjunction, verb to auxiliary verb and changing of personal pronouns. Additionally, sometimes Copland cut out exclamation marks and capital letters.

Changing words:
No.2 “There came a wind like a bugle” on the 5th line “We barred the windows and the doors” to “We barred the window and the doors.”

No.6 “Dear March, come in!” on the 28th line “That blame is just as dear as praise” to “And blame is just as dear as praise”

No.8 “When they come back” on the 7th line “If Robins may” to “if robins do”, and from the 13th to the 15th line, “Had nobody a pang/Lest on a face so beautiful He might not look again?” to “Has nobody a pang/that on a face so beautiful we might not look again.”

No.10 “I’ve heard an organ talk sometimes” on the 7th line “Yet knew not what was done to me” to “And know not what was done to me.”
About repetitions:

No.1 “Nature, the gentlest mother” on the last line “Wills silence everywhere.” is repeated once.

No.3 “Why do they shut me out of Heaven?” on the 8th line “But don’t shut the door!” is repeated once and “Could I forbid” is repeated twice. As well as, the first two lines appear again in the end of the song.

No.9 “I felt a funeral in my brain” on the 3rd line “Kept treading, treading, till it seemed” Copland inserted an extra “treading” and on the 7th line “Kept beating, beating, till I thought” an extra “beating” also appears.

No.11 “Going to heaven!” on the first line “Going to heaven!” is sung three times, on the 6th line “Going to heaven!” is repeated once and an extra “Going to heaven!” is put before the 20th line “I’m glad I don’t believe it,”. 
Chapter 5 Conclusion

Emily Dickinson left nearly 1800 poems in her 55 year long life. I learned the charm of Dickinson’s poetry by getting to know about her life. I am sure that Emily was a “spiritual” person. Around age 30, she almost stopped seeing people and interacting with the world around her. Instead, writing poems seemed to have been what was most important to her. I feel deeply that she was a monk who understood reincarnation and expressed it through her works.

I was able to understand her character, her curious and mysterious life style that is present in all her works. That is what I think was compelling to the composers of the 20th century, her unusual lifestyle matched the musical style of the 20th century.

It turned out that after searching for over 100 songs of Dickinson’s poetry, I found that the music of the 20th century was in perfect agreement of sympathy with Dickinson’s world. The music from the 20th century has not only beautiful melody lines, but often change tempo or time signature suddenly, jump large intervals or use repetition, and recitative style. It is the same as Dickinson’s style. Her poems are not simple to understand. Her world is not objective and her poems deal with the invisible things and our reincarnations. That is how Dickinson’s poetry world matched the characteristics of 20th century music.

I focused on “Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson” by Aaron Copland. I analyzed this song cycle and I learned that each song was composed with the meaning of the poem and flow of the whole work. I also felt that this song cycle was as if Copland and Dickinson worked together. It was entirely understandable
that creating Copland’s expressions of mysterious, spiritual and sometimes ironic expressions of the music came from the Dickinson’s universe.

It is interesting to me what the comma position means in the score. I had not really thought about the meaning of commas before. In particular, a feature of Dickinson was placing commas and dashes throughout her work. The clever usage of this together with the music by Copland deepened my thoughts on musical phrasing. I learned that focusing on poetic phrases and commas resulted in a natural legato as well as a cohesive flow of the music.

When I studied the song cycle, I first learned the entire poems and then studied the score. I usually learn the music first, then look at the lyrics and memorize them. However, this time, it was good for me to study the poems first. I was able to catch and feel that the music was made according to the flow of the poems. When I read the poems aloud and repeated them over and over again, I was able to catch the words that stood out or that I found most interesting. This was of use when I studied Copland’s music. I could express the words with more accent and feeling. Furthermore, this reduced mistakes with the lyrics when I sing the song cycle. I could feel satisfied with the performance and improved the excellence of the music.

In the beginning of my research, I was hoping to analyze and compare different composers’ work using the same poem of Dickinson. However, I looked up Dickinson first and found out that she left behind so many poems. Since it was hard to find the same poem with different music, I instead focused on one song cycle of one composer using her poetry. It was very astonishing to learn to me. It became more clear to me how to build up and structure the performance. It led to
deepening my performance when I better understood the composer’s creation. Especially, I could deeply catch an emotion between no.7 and no.8. Copland only wrote one instruction in the entire cycle, which was “long pause before starting no.8.” I sang “fortissimo” and “long fermata” in the last two bars as written in no.7. Pianist Anders Kilström played a great pedal technique, leaving a lingering sound and a moment of silence at the end. Afterwards, no.8 “When they come back” started. I felt that this created a flow of rebirth and was a real pleasure when performing the song cycle. If I had studied only one piece, I would probably not have understood the sense of Dickinson’s poetry and any deeper meaning. By studying the entire cycle I could grasp and express “reincarnation” through these twelve songs.

Finally, I have improved the level of expression of my singing performance after researching the poet Emily Dickinson. There is no doubt how important the poem is when understanding and interpreting an art song.
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